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Janine Wedel: 'Dark money' goes beyond elections



What do the words "dark money" mean to you? Unless you slept through the entire 2014 midterm election, you've heard the phrase, almost always referring to undisclosed donors swaying political elections.

But the insidious reach of dark money goes far beyond any blizzard of TV ads sponsored by groups you couldn't quite identify.

Donors and corporate interests try to shape policy, professional practices and public

opinion, not just every two years, but all the time, affecting our health, habitats and pocketbooks. And we have little way of knowing who's behind it.

1. Your Health: For nearly every disease there is a patient advocacy group, which do attract real sufferers and sincere advocates. But in recent years, Big Pharma has been exploiting their vulnerabilities to conduct veiled PR campaigns. Companies push their preferred drugs on prospective patients and their doctors. Advocacy groups can also serve as conduits of money and influence in advocating for legislation favored by drug-makers, under cover of "grassroots" advocacy.

And they often find handmaidens among elite physicians — so-called Key Opinion Leaders, or KOLs. KOLs are paid or perked by Big Pharma to convince fellow professionals that a particular company's product is most effective. Your own doctor might well have been influenced without even quite knowing it.

2. Your Energy Supply: What could sound more innocuous than the Clean and Safe Energy Coalition? What's left out of this title is that the energy source pushed by this group is nuclear energy. The Clean and Safe Energy Coalition is described on its website as a "national grassroots organization that supports the increased use of nuclear energy."

For years the group has a very powerful bullhorn: former Environmental Protection Agency administrator Christine Todd Whitman, and more recently, former U.S. trade representative Ron Kirk.

Both have appeared at grassroots-style visits all over the country. They also appear in top papers advocating "clean" nuclear energy; these pieces rarely make clear that "dark money" from the industry funds CASEnergy.

3. Your Food: The Center for Consumer Freedom also boasts a civic and innocuous-sounding name. In reality, it's a nonprofit enabler for soda-guzzlers and junk-food-lovers. Founded in 1996 by Big Tobacco and restaurant industries to thwart regulations on smoking, today it focuses on fighting restrictions on junk-food sales.

One of their pro-GMO ads presents an emaciated, apparently African child whom the nonprofit says needs "Food Not Propaganda." It does not mention the agri-business or food giant presumably that was providing the dark money for this. I say presumably because as a nonprofit, CCF doesn't have to report its donors.

This doesn't mean dark money in politics isn't a scourge; it is. It's just that the "dark money" deserves a far broader definition. These days, it's easier to trace the source of the bean in your morning coffee than it is to trace the agendas that subtly influence policy. And if that fact doesn't wake you up, no cup of coffee will.

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